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The quest

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Abstract
Though her younger days were spent in the squalid neighbourhood of Chetla, almost ever since she had had thoughts of her own, she had always dreamed of Ballygunge, the mecca of the middle class. Of Ballygunge and of romance. Of romance and of love. Just beyond those few crossings. Kalighat, Rashbehari, the Lake Market, and then as one left behind the green expanse of the Deshapriya Park, one would be right in the middle of that dream land.

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The Quest

Though her younger days were spent in the squalid neighbourhood of Chetla, almost ever since she had had thoughts of her own, she had always dreamed of Ballygunge, the mecca of the middle class. Of Ballygunge and of romance. Of romance and of love. Just beyond those few crossings. Kalighat, Rashbehari, the Lake Market, and then as one left behind the green expanse of the Deshapriya Park, one would be right in the middle of that dream land. Here, in the late afternoons or early evenings, the girls somewhat older than herself did not lean out over the parapets of roof-top terraces, arching their necks or coyly caressing their hair tied into taut plaits or buns. Nor did they loaf about in the streets in bands of girls like the girls of Bhawanipur, as reported by Aunt Bhami. The girls here would rather unhesitatingly stroll along the thoroughfares quite in step with the boys.

From year to year, through the eddies of time as it rolled by, as she grew in size like a bouncing trout, she dragged along with her her younger sister Uma by her hand on such strange forays. Raking about
with her pitiless Jaguar eyes, she saw how the girls of Ballygunge rested their elbows on the shoulders of their male companions, rummaged in the pockets of the boys' shirts and trousers, shared with them their precarious perches on the park railings, dangled those dust encrusted feet with enamelled toes, assumed a too easy familiarity of speech with them, roughhoused with them — slapping them and boxing their ears, and so, unselfconsciously, built up a magic world of excruciating vulgarity. And after that, to proceed a little further down the streets towards the Dhakuria Lakes felt like air-conditioned exhilaration with the very first sip of a drink following a spell of sweltering heat. Heady fragrance of flowers from above one's head — rows of trees stretched on both sides. The street lights stood still, afraid of breaking the pleasant stupor. Rude naked bulbs of light burned only in the kitchens. Otherwise, the houses had soft subdued lighting like cinema houses. The curtains too resembled those in the cinema houses. In fact, the music exactly like film music that she had heard coming from inside a couple of houses was confirmed to be really that of a piano. She wondered, was it quite proper that pianos and stereos and things should so brazenly thrum and bellow in the houses of gentlefolk? On a few evenings she prowled close to the edges of the Lakes and the Vivekananda Park and discovered with what effortless ease those same mannish girls could copy the coquetry of film actresses. In the tantalizing light and shade, their movements, the twitterers and giggles were altogether so different.

Ah! The enchanted darkness! In the vaguely malodorous breeze blowing in across the lake, the darkness dimpled. When the breeze blew stronger, the darkness broke into fragments. But how could that satisfy one's desire? Cheated of some untasted bliss, she was on fire with the intensity of her desire. That was not quenched even by pointlessly ill-treating the little sister. She would go back home and spend an interminable hour in the dark cool privacy of the tin-roofed shed serving as the bath room. But that too did not fully smother it. How could the faces of all those girls, the fair skinned and the dusky alike, wear such a glossy look? In which shop did they buy perfumes so subtle, yet so full of body? And at what price? In which school had they learned to talk in two such alternative voices? The game that they played behind the high heavy hangings or the dallying under the shade of trees was after all an old game, but what was the new thing that they did? Would she never catch a glimpse of it herself? Was that unknown new element called love? Was it for the sake of love that one felt to be on fire?
Well, Providence does not usually deprive people of what they really want though His temporal agents pour some brine into it while delivering the divine boon. Who knows, that too may very well be His pleasure. Anyway, at that juncture, the Lord of the little world of the nubile Roma was her father Aghore. Except for him, his family was made up of the two motherless growing daughters. The dark, affectionate, hefty man did not much care for education or culture. His job was to extract the last cent from his shopkeeping. But he easily got the point that the daughter had now to be married off. In his own way, he also assessed exactly what kind of a groom was required. The professional match-maker soon brought in a proposal. Roma with her plump body gleefully swam through the rounds of shopping, the old old jokes and banterings of the neighbours and relatives, and the gradually more and more obtrusive preparations and the various rituals.

In our society, the colour of the skin rather than one's features and figure would bolster up the ego more firmly. Her complexion was nothing but dusky. Her features, though lacking the inner glow of intelligence, were not unattractive under a careful scrutiny. But she had little grace, thanks to overweight and indiscriminate use of cosmetics. In fact, besides the obsession with Ballygunge and all that it meant to her, her only preoccupations were eating and sleeping. And her plan was that once she had left the motherless household, she would tumble down for a cat nap whenever her fancy went that way, in the lulling company of film magazines and film songs crooned over the radio. At the same time, she acutely felt that her youth was full to the brim. Just let her Prince Charming make his appearance, and let the magic of love touch her, and she would grow serene and tranquil. If the Prince had to be engaged in work or studies or anything else, let him. She had no desire for any kind of labour. One felt so near to ecstacy if one could lose oneself in the songs sung in a film, but she had never thought about the fact that it took disciplined effort to learn to sing. Her simple soul had steadfastly been aiming at raising a corner of that curtain of love and slipping inside, securing some nook for herself.

The match-maker pointed out that the groom came of excellent stock. He was healthy, with good habits, an assistant steward in a well known restaurant, making more in tips than in salary. Though not very educated himself, his elder brother had done much by way of higher studies and, settling down abroad, had married a regular European lady there; the groom was under the mature guardianship of his parents, living in their own three-storied house at Ballygunge, the lower floors
being rented out. In his shopkeeper's wisdom, Aghore too made certain discreet enquiries, and although all the information he got was not unmixed good, he found that the basic facts supplied by the matchmaker were not false on any count. He commented, 'Of course, Satu as a matchmaker never tries to cheat.'

Living in their own house at Ballygunge! Rather running to fat, mild mannered, pleasant featured, at the first sight of him, Roma accepted him with her whole heart. In any case she would never have said no unless he were too ugly looking or a cripple — after all, he held in his hand the key to Ballygunge. Moreover, he was but a little more fair complexioned, somewhat better featured than Roma. His occupation? She had seen from the outside the bars and restaurants on the Chowringhee and in Park Street, had caught glimpses of the interiors through the doors, had also noticed the arrivals and departures of people by taxis and cars. Unlike the romance of Ballygunge, she had not identified herself with those places, yet the aroma of imported wines and exotic perfumes clinging to the atmosphere there did hold an attraction for her, like some enticing sinfulness, though it also brought on a faint sense of nausea. Such luxuriously dim lights reigned there. Again she wondered, why did one have that delicious pang of lonesome yearning if it was not that the matter-of-fact lights in ordinary households were strangled and half dead? But Roma could never ponder for long over such complex questions. Besides, she was after all the daughter of a shopkeeper. She understood that only the rich had any access to Park Street. Let her Prince Charming have his connections there. Let him trail the traces of that night spot for the wealthy — like the wispy weeds hanging from the bulk of an old carp. Roma simply wanted to shut her eyes and dive deep into the waking dreams of her imminent good luck. Around the mat on which she lay, gusty winds from across the narrow stagnant branch of the river, smelling of mud, poured over the low parapet of the terrace and played a rowdy game in the gathering gloom.

However, the relations between darkness and the ceremonies of a Bengalee hindu marriage would be about as cordial as that between a snake and a mongoose. Even in that much avoided corner in the backyard reserved for the stinking pile of household refuse and junk, a bare electric bulb would suddenly smirk, showing its white teeth. In the unpaved piece of the yard in front which had so long been clinging to the scanty shade under the flowering sheuli, very much like a poor widow pathetically shrinking out of society's eyes — a naked light would expose the ungainly slab of stone on which coal was pieced or the heap of
cowdung waiting to be mixed with coaldust to make briquettes, in the obscene glee of Duhshashan who had publicly disrobed Draupadi in the epic of *Mahabharata*. The lights in the bridal chamber would in the nature of things be shameless, but the privacy of the nooks and corners on the terrace above, that refuge of ultimate privacy, would be equally violated. Traditionally turned into the improvised reception-cum-banquet hall, the terrace, ordinarily the private domain of the women folk, would become as public as the tawdry tent of any cheap circus on a rural circuit, in its temporary dressing of tarpaulin, thin cotton carpets, shabby red hangings, and above all with its clumsy festoon of light. However, like many brides to be, Roma too easily accepted all these excesses; all she needed was to pass this junction, almost like that awesome ferry at *Baitarani* where souls were supposed to cross over to the after-world. For, waiting on the far side were the thrills and ecstasy of love, the indulgences of love, the bottomless pit of love. She crossed the *Baitarani* of her marriage, deep under the anaesthesia of her dreamings of love and Ballygunge.

In the past, we were accustomed to dismiss it as superstition, but these days we know it to be a fact that the pace of time is not universally uniform; one single night in heaven will span one entire year on earth. In fact, the clammy intoxication that gets hold of one on the night of the wedding ceremony, with its sweat and silk brocades, the ornaments of gold and flowers, the smoke from the sacred fire and the incantation of religious verses, the sickly scent of the essences of flowers and the indecencies licensed by the occasion — by the time one gets over it, one is chock-full of experiences. Just as on a journey by river boat, one may wake up after a long sleep in the little cabin made of split bamboos and may come out on the open deck to realize with amazement that the land on either shore wears an unfamiliar look, that one has travelled a long way under the cover of the drowsy night. When Roma got back her bearings, she found the innocent, overfed daughter, looking like a buffalo calf, to be already some ten years old. The spherical son, a fair skinned replica of her mother-in-law, quite before he had completed his fourth year, was dancing around like the Lord of Destruction Himself, beating up people, breaking things, and using un-childlike language like ‘I shall bash your head in’, ‘You son of a bitch’, etc. Roma’s mother-in-law, the second wife of the lately deceased father-in-law, had suddenly let go her grip of things, after a long unchallenged reign. Roma was now the absolute mistress of the household. Yet, on crossing thirty, she reeled under the
unexpected shock of stumbling upon the yawning chasm of an immense vacuum. Innumerable Bengalee matrons suffer from a trauma like this, soon after the euphoria of marriage wears thin.

Now there was no novelty in the routine pleasures of the human body, nor in the sham attractions of socialising. No more was there the coddling that had been one's due when carrying one's first child, nor one's existence as the centre of all attention in the nursing home, nor the back-breaking tyranny of the regime of feeding bottles and gripe mixtures. In these times there would not even be the residual obligations of having to wait upon the aged in-laws. There would be only three things in one's world — oneself, the Prince Charming, and the time on one's hand. There was so much leisure that she was quite drunk with it for a while. The male cook, the two full-time servants, male and female, the charwoman, the part-time gardener — the entire establishment and style of her late father-in-law she had kept intact, though that was not exactly within the means of her husband. For, otherwise, her precious leisure might get eroded. To do the daily marketing and to dress the vegetables for cooking — an elaborate function in itself — were her mother-in-law's responsibility. Her leisure was absolute. But where was that long awaited thrill, that electric touch of the object of her quest?

Roma, restless with her yearning, was a great favourite of the hawkers and pedlars. Did it quench a little that particular thirst of hers if she swallowed a number of large ice cones in quick succession? Or by eating a large number of puffed balls of pasted pulses filled with sour and chilly-hot gravy that set her palate on fire? Or by hurriedly downing a tall glass of sugar cane juice? She recklessly bought pots and pans from pedlar women, saris from hawkers of handloom sari, joss sticks without caring for quality and indiscriminately lighting them, flung down her overfed body upon the too soft bed, while some programme or other in Bengali or Hindi subliminally crooned or murmured over the radio, and she would vaguely come to the conclusion that she had been cheated out of something unknown but precious. If this particular state of mind could somehow be made to linger for a while, one or two drops of tears might sneak out of her eyes, and through the rest of the day her voice resonated with a sad hollowness. That voice of hers might sound unmusically plaintive to casual listeners, or on such occasions her massive countenance might carry the crude impression of grumpiness to many, but the fire raged less in her heart. However, on those days, when defeating all her efforts, those cursed eyes of hers would in no way get wet, the rage consumed her vitals with redoubled fury.
Inflamed with her own passion, she made the life of everybody within her reach hellish with the ascending scale of the violence of her language, with the blaze of her fury. She would actually roll her eyes, stamp her feet. Peaceloving Sushanto had since the death of his father become accustomed to drinking openly — for pleasure. At this excessive lack of domestic peace, he started to drink heavily, for, without drinking, he could not lose his usual mildness of manners. By and by, on holidays and whenever threatened with the intimate company of his dearest, he got used to fortifying himself with a few quick ones. The neighbours too learned to take as a matter of course the almost regular recurrence of their noisy domestic troubles. Only, neither the members of her family nor the outsiders guessed that there was a secret tender spot in her heart where an old fish hook lodged, tugging at it, ever since her adolescence.

Her sister Uma suffered from no such handicap. Her husband was rather teddy-boyish. He only had to allow Uma a ride on his motorbike to let her taste heavenly bliss. Their five-year old offspring persistently pronounced 's' in place of 'sh', a typical characteristic of the cockney of Calcutta, but that did not cause the least headache to Uma or her husband. Uma just had no thought in her head, so had no worry either. Whatever the others did in each hour of the day and the night, they too did the same at that hour. And they went to see a film or a stage show every weekend. They merely swam with the traditional currents of life as lived in the northern and older districts of the city. In a life of simple biology, uncomplicated as it is with the agonies and ecstacies of love, pleasures are aplenty as long as one's youth lasts. Perhaps it was through an echo in the dark chemistry of kinship that she felt in her own way the odd vacuum plaguing her elder sister. She was naturally frightened of any kind of vacuum. As a child shuts her eyes and switches off the light at bed time, she frantically looked for a way to fill the ugly vacuum and proposed that the four of them together might go to the theatre, sit on the bank of the river in a cosy evening, or even meet for an occasional drinking party. Exercising her conventional liberty as the sister-in-law, she went to the extent of making a somewhat drunken Sushanto do supposed physical exercises for reducing his girth. The heaviness of the weather was dissipated a little by such gusts of fun and frolic. But that too proved to be too short lived. The charm of newness wore thin. That hussy was of course her own sister, but was she not now too big to pull such shameless pranks! And that overgrown child of a man, Sushanto, — did he take himself for a young beau like Uma’s husband? Really, how punctiliously would that fellow bring home boxfuls of food from his
office! — Yes, she had started referring to her husband's place of work as his 'office'.

Again the flames of that fire inside her were kindled. The heroes and heroines of the stage could on occasions melt her into tears. And it was in the lure of that that she went and sat once every week on those shabby plush seats marked with the perspirations of generations of theatre-goers, in that half light, overburdened with an oppressive medley of scents and perfumes. But that too failed to do the trick. She was eating her heart out. Everybody was knowingly or unknowingly deceiving her, denying her the access to the supreme secret. Of what use was it to devour the titillating details served up in the film magazines? The summer of her life, her hour of truth was slipping by.

That young woman who lived in the house at the top of the street acted in films. It was anybody's guess what funs and what thrills she enjoyed, and made how much money into the bargain. Roma had heard that the woman kept her money in the local branch of the bank, and therefore had rung up the bank. She would have had a vicarious satisfaction if she could know how much the woman had piled up in the bank. But those awful men at the bank could in no way be persuaded to disclose that to Roma. Roma sent her little son over to the woman's place on this and that pretext in the hope of establishing some relationship with her. She had heard that actresses were fond of little children. The little boy was chubby and fair complexioned at the time. But that cherubic child soon assumed such destructive propensities, that even though she was his mother she realized that he was a complete misfit for such diplomatic missions. So, no social connection had been established with the unsuspecting film actress. And therefore, Roma had no inhibitions now about frankly proclaiming that women like that actress there were practically no better than prostitutes. Still, though that woman was not aware of it, Roma remained indebted to her on one count. Roma nowadays wore her sari always below her navel, as she had once seen the woman do.

The man next door was reputed to write dramas. Roma had heard his name in radio programmes. Any number of long haired young men and short haired women came to his place at all hours of the day. What atrocious hobnobbing went on there till past midnight! Roma was infuriated. What was that fellow up to? She had borrowed from him one or two of the plays written by him. She had gone to his place to use his telephone when her own telephone had been out of order, and had tried to engage him in small talk. He was said to write so many dramas, he must have had so many more juicy dramas in his own life, he could not surely spend
all that time with all those women visitors of all ages in discussing the
scripts. Yet, let alone guide Roma across that unknown threshold he
talked to her with the deference a man would reserve for the Principal
of a convent. She smiled a bitter smile as she stood sidewise in front
of her mirror and looked over her shoulder at her well rounded arm
which she voluptuously moved round this way and that. Why? Was she
truly as repulsive as all that? At the end, she had screamed at the top of
her voice, out of the intensity of vexation, that the man was a debauch. A
debauch and an impotent male. Let him hear that. If she could provoke
him into a direct confrontation with herself, she might have a little relief.
But the wretch was presumably deaf as well. He made not the slightest
noise in reply.

Oh! She felt so helpless. Her home was at Ballygunge. Sushanto had
been born and brought up in the heart of Ballygunge. His elder brother
lived in England with his uncontestably white skinned wife, but he never
missed remembering his young sister-in-law when sending out gifts and
good wishes in the season of the Puja. Since the passing away of her
father-in-law the savings of the family might have been eaten into in
order to keep her leisure intact, but she had nothing wanting, materially.
She had plenty to eat and to wear, and she slept and bought things to her
heart’s content. Yet, in spite of all that, it was she who had to suffer from
this eternal ache in her heart. While that empty headed girl, Uma was
always so happy and contented. Why was she satisfied with her lot? How
was she satisfied? Must be due to her husband. Then, what was wrong
with Roma? After all, she too had everything else. Her husband was not a
cripple either. Then what? Then why did her husband fail to lead her by
her hand, to take her over and across the threshold of romance? Was it
all a mean conspiracy? Or was it due to a curious impotence? Impotent!
Impotent! Over there, the wife of that vagabond-like sweeper lolled
against the flowering gulmor and shamelessly tickled the back and the
bare waist of her man, amorously cuddling and caressing him. She would
most certainly have purred, had she been a cat. Roma shot flames
through the corner of her eyes and burned inside. Dear Lord! Even those
low class people of Ballygunge had got it! That hoity toity actress had got
it! That good for nothing writer of dramas had got it. Only she had not
got it. She had settled at Ballygunge, the land of her adolescent dreams.
The other inconsequential things — she had got them all. The only thing
that she had not got was the key to that thing of mystery. That what was
available even to the animals, to those lowly people, which made them
wriggle in pleasure, or be drunk with a deeper pleasure. Oh oh oh! On
whom could she take out her intense frustration?

Well, the grudge had necessarily to find its target in luckless Sushanto. Sushanto's mother too had seen life flow past her out of her reach. As long as Sushanto’s father was alive, she had an objective ready at hand to vent her spleen on. When he died, Sushanto’s mother also died in her heart. For, a Bengalee woman generally dies when her grudge dies. She had at first tried to keep alive by keeping herself occupied in wrangling with her daughter-in-law, for, who wants to die so easily? But owing to the deep-rooted motivation, Roma’s innate vitality assumed such devastating proportions that the older woman’s stamina was no match for it. Sushanto’s mother withdrew within herself. Thus, Roma, with her irresistible power, single-mindedly concentrated on enjoying her leisure. And on her frantic search for the elusive romance. And now in the agony of the approaching end of the summer of her life, she relentlessly exercised her despotic right to be capricious, and made the life of soft-hearted Sushanto so miserable that he gasped for breath.

Unfortunately, however, no one guessed that if Sushanto had merely practised a little firmness, if he had but given an occasional thrashing to her, and had also had playfully given her some childish indulgence — untimely and without any reason whatsoever — there might possibly have been at least a partial solution of this singular problem of conjugal existence. But, because he too, like many other weak-kneed Bengalee males, only tried to control Roma by applying dull logic, her insane sense of loss and anger increased and turned into outright loathing. Poor Sushanto indulged his undesirable addiction practically at all hours of the day. He increased the amount of the drinks that he took. He nearly lost his job while trying to steal drinks at his place of work. After rescuing the job from the crisis, he took to drinking cheap illegally distilled spirits. Drinking any kind of rubbish that he could get whenever he could get it, he developed painful ulcers in the stomach. As a result, his drinking bouts and the violent scenes of Roma were halted for the time being. But as soon as he regained his health, both started afresh. This time with redoubled vehemence.

The fire raging in Roma knew no abating now. Right from early morning till late in the evening she screamed at everybody for everything. Occasionally, she dressed up, sprinkled a quantity of perfume on herself, and briskly stepped out, modelling herself on the young wife of the new tenant on the ground floor. The difference was, the other one was a working woman and therefore had a specific destination, while Roma had none. Yet out in the street, she cooled down. Relapsing into the
habit of her younger days, she kept her eyes open — lest she missed something happening there. Though now she also pretended that she was a busy woman, as if she had to keep some appointment at a certain hour at a certain place. Meanwhile her mother-in-law and the much harassed servants could breathe a little freely. Within an hour or two, however, she would come back, for some reason or other she would lose her equanimity, and would resume her screaming fury. If Sushanto happened to be at home, he invariably went out and sat in the country-liquor shop on the fringe of the locality. When he returned home, sprawling in a rickshaw, he didn't have the capacity to climb the stairs. He huddled in a semi-conscious state on the narrow cemented bench there or straight away lay down flat upon it. The male cook and the servant half carried, half helped him upstairs. If he felt like it, he threw up what he had taken. And then he fell into a drunken sleep, snoring loudly. For a few hours the fellow was safe from the terrible torment.

Roma also found for herself a route of temporary escape. Shouting herself hoarse through the whole day tired out even that powerful constitution of hers by evening. In a way she relished this feeling of tiredness, unconsciously associating it with the maniacal shopping sprees occasioned by the Pujas or a marriage in the family — shopping being the only other kind of hard labour known to her. After bathing her tired frame, and putting on a garland of fragrant buds of bel — she stretched herself out in great luxury on the cot kept on the rooftop terrace. Little light reached there. The bustling sounds from other people's households softly reached her ears across the intervening distance. Partially under the soporific recollection of half-remembered childhood memories, partly under the fatigue of the day-long disquiet, and partly due to the physical separation from all those so invariably deceitful human beings, she felt a little drugged. She was faintly intoxicated with the shadowy dimness of the light. At that particular moment, she did not think that she had the smallest relationship of give and take with a single person in the wide world. In her own reckoning, she was done with all duties and all obligations. In her absolute independence, now, she trembled upon the brink of a bottomless, shoreless, immense unconscious. She never figured it out, intellect was foreign to her, but maybe, at that moment when her heart felt like melting, she was poised for the great transcendence, — a merger with the Supreme Being. Unknown to that tortured soul, the Supreme Being did make an appearance over her horizon at that moment.

At the slightest frown of the Omnipotent, cataclysmic thunder rained
down. In this case, at His infinitesimal smile, hundreds of megawatts of electricity were drained off in a moment from the farflung circulatory system of the metropolis. Along with those of millions of other citizens, the environment of Roma too was plunged into an untimely blackout. In the embrace of the unaccustomed darkness, the absorbed soul of the woman murmured, ‘Oh my heart! Oh the enchanting darkness. Aunty Bhami told us the tale of the pair of magic wands, holding the secrets of life and death, deep in the mysterious depths of the magic pool, and now for me too, all that remains to do is to wait, only to wait for the Prince Charming, to await his touching me with the stick of life.’

By some queer turn of fate, the Prince Charming really appeared. Her Prince drew his strength from strong drinks, the strength to dominate and to have his own way. Today he was full of that strength. Even in the darkness, the open terrace there was so very lacking in privacy. Timid by nature, Sushanto, scorned that obstacle today. He had lost his youthfulness, but that was of no consequence. Indisciplined living had added to his bodyfat, that also did not matter. Strangely passive, Roma found herself carried almost over and across that ever elusive ankle high threshold by the surging sweaty passion of her husband. Oh my Dear! Is this the thing? A little more please, only a very little more, please carry me a little further, I shall not speculate about it any more, I shall not ask anything more, just get me there, please let me remain there for all eternity. Thus cast up on the crest of the massive wave at the loin of the great lightless city, Roma spent the better part of the next fortnight reliving the spellbinding memory of a few deep dark ecstatic moments. This too was somewhat unprecedented for her. She had never had any use for recollecting the recent past.

But for how long could one get by ruminating upon past pleasure? That total metropolitan darkness did not happen every day. Even when there was a powercut, Aghore might drop in, calling for his ‘Little Governor’, the grandson so dear to him. Or some other impediment might crop up to prevent her going up to the terrace. Or even when she would arrive there, arrive there with a tremulous heart, and even if the throbbing hairy darkness gathered her up into its embrace, her Prince Charming might be absent, or he might not have shed his inhibitions or, due to too much drinking, he might have attained another kind of imbecility — so, the Prince would be there, but not the magic wand. Alas, no, the magic wand was not there. She came to be possessed by her old obsession in its new shape. As the spells of darkness grew deeper and longer in the life of the metropolis, her impatience too threatened to get
absolutely out of control. At long last, at this late hour, she had caught a
glimpse of the tip of the tower of that castle of mystery. All those long
years of privation of hers had not gone in vain, here was her own Prince,
now she had had a fleeting touch of the magic wand. O Lord, please be
kind, please be bountiful, please do not tantalize me any more, the time
is almost over.

But under the onslaught of incessant violence, too much lack of peace,
Sushanto with his little intelligence and a soft heart had completely lost
his wits. He had no inkling of what took place when and why. On some
evenings when Roma had got drunk with pleasure, he like a gust of wind
found and scattered self confidence. But a gust of wind spends itself in a
spendthrift moment. Then, the cheated, frustrated, impatient Roma’s
bites, scratchings and intense obscenities of language drained out his
desire for life, not to speak of his self confidence. Simple minded Roma,
in hunting for the roots of love, merely stirred up the pungent mud of
violent desperation. In the mind of Sushanto too, was gradually
awakened the violence of a coward driven to desperation. The venom is
so potent in the instinct of self preservation of a weak-willed person.
Right at the heart of the crisis-ridden metropolis the two children of God
approached the last act in the drama of life and death.

Over the last few days, the electricity crisis had exceeded all limits.
Through the entire day there had been no fan, at dusk there was no
light. All were gasping. Roma burned from two sides, from the inside
and from the outside, and only counted the hours to her strange tryst
every evening. But the hours passed by. The Prince, for some reason or
other, made no appearance. Roma in her intense fixation spared
nobody. Her mother-in-law, Sushanto, the two children, the servants, all
lay shattered under the lashings of her poisonous tongue. There was no
rain, not a whisper of breeze, no fan moved, no light shone, no relief
anywhere. She somehow finished her evening bath, and anxiously
climbed up to the terrace, toying with the ubiquitous string of the ivory-
like buds of fragrant bel. She must be there to keep her vigil for an hour
or two. The other inmates of the house too had learned to wait for that
welcome interval. That was the single oasis of peace in their tortured
lives. Her mother-in-law, completely at the end of her tether, lay in the
darkness, with a fan in her hand. In the impolite heat of the kerosene
lantern the two children shyly tried to behave as children should.
Fragments of their playful noise reached the ears of Roma but raised no
ripple in her consciousness. The servants gossiped among themselves in
low voices. The sound floated up of the cook slapping at his chewing
tobacco as he mixed it with lime. Roma shut her eyes upon the immense bowl of the night turned upside down, prickly with myriads of stars. For she wanted to see the bottom of the darkness. She did not trust her senses, she had alerted her soul to catch any signal of the approaching Prince. She did not pray for him to come, for, he must come.

The night deepened. The sounds of the city grew dim. The sky held its breath and came closer, blackening out everything. Heavy footsteps noiselessly came up the stairs. Their deep inaudible vibrations echoed right in her womb. In icy ecstasy she lay still like a cadaver, without making the least shift in her position. The Prince halted for a moment at the landing, and then the hushed terrace quivered to his soundless tread as he came up and stood by the bare cot. A too familiar fragrance saturated the atmosphere. For a split second her consciousness hazily registered an unknown sound, small and sharp, as if a powerful machine had got out of control and was clicking on and on in a devilish frequency. What was that? The next instant, however, whatever little capacity for thinking she had was wiped out. In an irresistible impulse Sushanto leaped upon her inert body. She did not actively help him, nor did she hinder him, she simply accepted him in full. The awesome whirlpool of a dark joy pulled her away with a breathtaking quickness. Violently swinging, she plunged down into the bottomless pit of the vortex. Faster, quicker. Ah — immensely powerful mountains of revolving waters loomed over her on all sides. That was her couch — those frothing slopes of water, those were the walls of her prison too. Her hands, her feet, the bodily features, her character — nothing existed anymore, nor were they necessary. Should she only let herself be carried down that angry, dark, liquid tunnel, to attain that ultimate for which there had been so much pain, all that yearning? Yes, that was perhaps the first time that she wept in joy. But that too was trivial. At that moment of supreme crisis in the life of that woman of little intelligence and coarse of body, Man once again realized that there was no real distinction between tears and laughter. As the great darkness transcended into light, at that hairline of time when intense pleasure — indistinguishable from intense pain — was poised for the tremendous strike to pierce her heart through, her intelligence awakened, she effortlessly understood that Sushanto was about to kill her. But what fear did death hold for her, now that she had achieved so easy a command over the original rhythm of life?

Not the slightest breeze was there. As the still air was strangled out of her throat under the press of congealed fragrance, it became clear to her that Sushanto in his madness had poured out the entire contents of her
dearest jar of scent upon the soft pillow. No, it could be no irony at her unbridled fancy for perfumes, there certainly could be no distinction between the height of rage and the most consuming desire. She was only a little pained by the grinding of his teeth. But small imperfections also were unavoidable parts of life. That she once waved her hand was only to say, 'Dearest mine, I love you, right now I have got the quest of my love, whatever you may think of it, you are but loving me, these harsh abrasive utterances of yours are but our love-talk.'

Some unearthly stereo strummed and blared. What massive waves of sound. One's eardrums and the very brain felt like exploding. Deeper and deeper darkness rushed in. Bursting asunder the very womb of darkness, gigantic fountains of dark fireworks welled up in an anguish of unbearable pain or pleasure. The long forgotten Aunt Bhami revealed herself in a staccato of discontinuous moments of visibility as that fountain of black light spewed in spasms. 'Aunty, dear, I have got the Magic Wand.' There stood Aghore, roaring in laughter in his simplicity of a trader, crying to her, 'Darling, you just be sure that the account balances.'

First published in AMRITA (11 January 1980), a mass circulation weekly of Calcutta. The original title ABHIGAMINI, a little used word now, literally means a woman making a special kind of journey, particularly to meet her lover. Today's standard colloquial idiom being inadequate for the theme and the mood, a sombre, chaste Bengali was used in the text.